

The District of Columbia Commission on Black Men and Boys
Mr. George Starke, Chairman
“Empowering our Men and Boys to Save the Black Family”

**TESTIMONY OF GEORGE STARKE, CHAIRMAN
COMMISSION ON BLACK MEN AND BOYS**

**BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
ON
BLACK MEN AND BOYS IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AND
THEIR IMPACT ON THE FUTURE OF THE BLACK FAMILY**

SEPTEMBER 12, 2003

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton established the District of Columbia Commission on Black Men and Boys, in consultation with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies with initial funding from the U.S. Department of Labor. The purpose of the Commission is to draw upon community experience and expert testimony to understand the impediments to success that African American young men and boys face, identify opportunities to improve services from the government and private sector, and propose a concrete plan of action to help overcome these obstacles. It is hoped that this work may be useful not only to federal agencies but also to local jurisdictions, who also may want to establish such commissions and tackle these issues.

The Commission is deliberately small. It consists of twelve men, including an elected official, a minister, a youth program director, and community activists, who work or volunteer or have experience working directly with black boys or

men. An Advisory Board with a wide variety of both scholarly and practical expertise on issues relating to problems facing boys and young black men supports the commission. Names and occupations are attached with the written testimony for further review.

As part of the Commission's work, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies completed a report in February 2002 on *Youth Development Needs and Capacities in the District of Columbia*. The Commission has also held three community town hall hearings that have addressed issues concerning education and training, the importance of family, mentors and role models, and the criminal justice system.

Recommendations:

The current recommendations set forth by the Commission and its Advisors are based on testimony provided by community leaders, and input from Commission members. Thus far, the following recommendations were determined to be the significant social, educational, economic, health, and justice needs of Black Men and Boys in the District of Columbia.

1. WE URGE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS TO EXERCISE GREATER COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION OF SERVICES ON BEHALF OF BLACK MEN AND BOYS.

There is a serious disconnect between services and programs for Black men and boys and their utilization by residents and some duplication and overlap that leaves too many boys unreached. Many boys and young men are more reluctant to utilize programs than are girls and young women.

The culture of the streets keeps many boys and young men from coming forward for programs, training or education. To be affective, programs and educators need to fan out and reach out to boys and young men.

Local government agencies and federally funded programs must do a better job of connecting existing services. For example, police detaining youth should be connected to the various schools, mentoring, and other social service programs whenever possible. The impact of what individual local agencies do is significantly enhanced when there is greater coordination and collaboration of services.

**2. WE URGE GREATER FAMILY SUPPORT, COMMUNITY SUPPORT,
AND HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS.**

Chronic problems facing Black men and boys can be effectively addressed through resources available in families and community agencies. Strong families and communities produce responsible men.

Although there are an abundance of resources available for strengthening families and neighborhoods, the lack of effective communication efforts to educate the public of their availability hinders usage of these resources.

Proper housing is a problem particularly acute among low-income families, especially men re-entering society from prison. Finding stable and affordable housing in the District of Columbia further exacerbates the problems faced by Black men and boys and contributes to the breakdown of families and communities.

**3. WE URGE THE PROMOTION AND THE PROVISION OF PHYSICAL
AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS.**

Effective community education programs regarding the importance of sound physical and mental health among Black men and boys are

extremely limited. The direct effects on the overall development of Black men and boys are too rarely addressed as a point of restoration for those men and boys who are responsible and purpose driven. Additionally, the effects of childhood traumas and parents rearing practices need to be a part of the broader discussion that advocates for increased counseling and support groups for Black men and boys.

4. **WE URGE GREATER AVAILABILITY OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS.**

There must be greater attention given to addressing the need for alternative education strategies that bridge the gap between employability and the marketability of Black Men and Boys. For example, there is considerable new development and building construction occurring in Washington, DC. Employment opportunities created by these developments can increase skills and reduce the unemployment rates of Black men. The absence of vocational training in the public schools and the lack of apprenticeship programs have stifled the development of employability skills among Black men.

However, Congresswoman Norton has gotten GSA to commit to requiring apprentice programs in all federal construction and renovation. This is an important example of how training and high paying jobs can be developed.

Numerous reports, including the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies February 2002 Report for our Commission, show the incredible dropout rates of black boys from traditional public school. Too little emphasis has been put on vocational training as an option.

5. WE URGE GREATER AVAILABILITY OF RE-ENTRY AND SECOND CHANCE PROGRAMS FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS.

Almost 50% of prison inmates are Africa-American males. With the great influx of Black Men coming back into the community from prison, government has focused on their rehabilitation through individual services, a very important new emphasis here in the District where such services were not previously available. However, there needs to be a greater effort to include the family and community in the re-entry process to insure a successful second chance for men to become responsible and productive citizens, fathers and family members.

6. **WE URGE EXPANDED JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM FOR BLACK BOYS.**

Men who are incarcerated often are boys who have been in detention centers. Greater resources need to be directed to the prevention of youth detention and recidivism.

7. **WE URGE THE AVAILABILITY OF MORE MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS.**

A wide variety of methods for mentoring programs allow for increased options that can be customized to fit what is needed in the District of Columbia for men and boys. In particular, business oriented mentoring should be expanded.

Expanding opportunities for Black men and boys in the District of Columbia will require leadership from the citizens, the local and federal governments, the private sector, the schools, faith-organizations, and the community at large.